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ABSTRACT

The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) is an internationally recognized outdoor school with five branch schools located in Wyoming, Alaska, Kenya, Mexico, and Washington. The philosophy of NOLS is to develop judgment and leadership skills in its students. Three priorities guide this school: (1) safety and care of the individual; (2) safety and care of the environment; and (3) safety and care of equipment. The school's program is designed to educate students in all aspects of wilderness living, with attention to safety, and to give students experiences by which they can evaluate and address hazards in the outdoors. Safety at the NOLS is based on education, experience, the judgment. This paper describes the various facets of the program that insure the safety of the individual, including safety management levels, course descriptions, training programs/seminars, first aid training, course paperwork, admissions, and student responsibilities. (ALL)

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SAFETY MANAGEMENT

at

The National Outdoor Leadership School

July 1988

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NOLS

THE NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL

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SAFETY MANAGEMENT

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Background

The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) was founded in 1965 by Paul Petzoldt. From its start as a summer outdoor program located in Lander, Wyoming, NOLS is now a year-round internationally recognized outdoor school with five branch schools located in Wyoming, Alaska, Kenya, Mexico and Washington. Approximately 1,900 students enroll each year. When multiplied by the number of days out on courses, this computes to more than 70,000 people-days in the field. NOLS is one of the largest backcountry permittees in the U.S. Forest Service system with over 30,000 visitor days. The remainder of NOLS' "classroom" days take place in National Parks and Preserves, Bureau of Land Management areas, and the Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

The NOLS philosophy since the School's inception has been to develop judgment and leadership skills in our students. Our program is designed to educate students on all aspects of wilderness living, most importantly safety concerns, and to give students experiences by which they can evaluate and address hazards in the outdoors. We have few rules or policies governing everyday activities on our courses. Safety at NOLS is based on education, experience and judgment.

Safety Objectives

The NOLS mission is to be the best source and teacher of wilderness skills and leadership which protect both the user and the environment. Throughout the school's history three priorities have guided the National Outdoor Leadership School. These are: 1) safety and care of the individual, 2) safety and care of the environment, 3) safety and care of equipment.

Safety of the individual has been and continues to be the most important priority — first and foremost. NOLS believes anything less is unacceptable.

This paper describes the various facets of the NOLS Safety Program which insures the safety of the individual.

The NOLS Safety Program

The excellent safety record NOLS has maintained is due to a system designed to continually improve that record. The program is overseen and reviewed by a variety of individuals and is continually upgraded through audits, reviews and educational seminars.

I. Safety Management Levels

A. The NOLS Board of Trustees Safety Committee:

The NOLS Board of Trustees Safety Committee closely monitors the program and results and par-

ticipates in safety audits. To this extent it is responsible for safety.

B. Executive Director

The Executive Director oversees the Safety Program at the management level. The Director consults with the Safety Committee and implements trustee policies, reports to the trustees monthly and quarterly, as well as reviewing the ongoing safety program.

C. Safety Officer

The Safety Officer at NOLS is responsible for developing and implementing safety at the program level. The Safety Officer monitors injury and illness reports, reports annually to the Board Safety Committee and Executive Director, and consults with loss control experts, physicians and other outdoor education managers for insights into ways to improve both field and intown safety.

D. Personnel Office

Personnel is responsible for the recruitment, selection, and training of NOLS field staff. Foremost in importance is obtaining an experienced, well-trained staff to insure a safe learning experience for students.

E. Branch Directors

Each Branch Director is responsible for their branch's Safety Program at the field level through: instructor briefings before the course; safety policies or guidelines for specific courses; instructor debriefings after the course; periodic safety reports to the Safety Office; monitoring safety concerns from staff; course design and emergency procedure planning.

F. Course Leaders

Course Leaders are experienced field staff promoted to this position in an orderly advancement through the NOLS instructor ranks, after having demonstrated high levels of experience, judgment, skill and safety awareness.

G. Field Staff

The field staff directly influence the safety of the student in the field through their training and experience.

II. Programs and Seminars

NOLS has a variety of programs and seminars designed to insure safe courses:

A. The NOLS Instructors Course

NOLS field staff are carefully selected to lead and teach courses. The selection process begins with a thorough screening of applicants. On average seventy percent of all applicants are NOLS graduates who have been recommended by their instructors. The remainder are nongraduates who have strong outdoor resumes. Approximately one-third of these qualified applicants are selected to participate in the Instructors Course.

The course is an intensive 35-day learning experience in which all aspects of the curriculum are

covered, with a strong emphasis on safety. Only the best students who complete the course are offered employment at the School. First-time field staff are hired on an apprenticeship basis and must demonstrate a high level of competence to become a certified instructor; only certified instructors are offered subsequent employment. NOLS is the only world-wide outdoor school that has such a rigorous in-house recruitment, selection and training program, a program that continually supplies the school with highly competent, trained and experienced field staff.

B. Instructor Training and Development

NOLS believes one of the key components to a safe program is the development of a professional, experienced and skilled core of instructors. To this end NOLS offers a variety of training opportunities to further instructor development as well-rounded outdoor leaders and teachers:

1. **Instructor Development Program** — encourages advancement in the field of outdoor education, emphasizing a broad base of experience, knowledge and skills, as well as continuing education.
2. **Technical Skill Development Seminars.** NOLS has in-house training programs in: avalanche awareness, winter skills, Emergency Medical Technican training, rock climbing, cliff rescue, caving, glacier travel, natural history, canyoneering, ice climbing, sailing, rafting and sea and white-water kayaking.
3. **Personal Skills Development Seminars.** NOLS provides staff training in leadership, group/expedition dynamics, educational techniques, post-traumatic stress and evaluation techniques.
4. **Instructor Promotions.** NOLS has three levels of responsibility for field staff: instructor, patrol leader and course leader. Typically, an individual will work several courses at one level. After demonstrating competence, judgment, and safety awareness, he/she is then promoted to the next level. This process assures highly competent, skilled and experienced field staff at all levels.
5. **Assistant Program.** A particular instructor may be highly skilled for one course type but lack a skill for another. This program allows an instructor an opportunity to gain experience in a particular area before working as an instructor on that type of course.
6. **Winter Instructor Training and Avalanche Training.** This course teaches the skills for living safely and comfortably in a winter environment. It is required of all staff working winter programs.

NOLS has developed its own "NOLS Avalanche Seminar" to address the requirements for avalanche safety. The seminar is part of the curriculum for each winter certified instructor. In addition, the same seminar is offered to students on the Winter Outdoor Educators Course. Students on all winter and mountaineering courses in Alaska receive instruction in avalanche safety as part of their course

curriculum. NOLS is developing an advanced level avalanche seminar to further train field staff in avalanche safety and rescue.

C. First Aid Training

Each NOLS instructor must hold, as a minimum, Red Cross Advanced First Aid Certification as well as CPR training.

NOLS has developed in-house first aid courses for its field staff, including an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) program and a First Responder course with a wilderness emphasis. These courses make NOLS field staff some of the best trained backcountry first-aid specialists in the world. Competent in backcountry emergency situations, they also teach basic wilderness first aid, safety and emergency procedure classes to students. Additionally, every NOLS student receives training in safety and accident prevention, hazard evaluation, injury prevention and treatment, and rescue techniques.

NOLS offers its field staff annual training in cave rescue, cliff rescue, water rescue and advanced lifesaving to meet our needs in these specialized areas.

NOLS currently offers a program of Wilderness First Aid training to Wyoming Semester Course students.

NOLS shares its safety expertise with other outdoor organizations through various seminars and programs. NOLS held its first National Wilderness Medicine Symposium in 1986, which was attended by over 350 participants. Experts addressed backcountry medical issues while NOLS staff spoke about safety and led a practical emergency medical care clinic. NOLS staff frequently address symposiums on topics such as safety, risk management and wilderness medicine.

D. Evaluations

Evaluations are numerous and thorough at NOLS — examining all aspects of each course and the safety program in particular. Field Staff complete a performance self-evaluation at the end of each course, targeting areas of strength as well as areas needing improvement. Field staff then evaluate each other by the same criteria. In addition, instructors evaluate each student and, in turn, each student evaluates his or her instructors. Safety, judgment, decision-making and leadership are integral components that are reviewed on these evaluations.

The student evaluation by instructors indicates student strengths and limitations — pointing out areas requiring additional experience in order for the student to become a safe, well-rounded outdoors person able to lead wilderness trips. Optional oral evaluations are normally offered to students several times during the course to discuss individual progress and safety concerns. Instructor evaluations by students indicate instructor strengths and limitations through the eyes of the students.

All evaluations are reviewed at the end of each course by a debriefer at the branch school level. This process gives the field staff and the branch school an opportunity to review the course safety practices for the purpose of continually improving the School's Safety Program.

Each instructor is encouraged to receive an annual performance review from the Personnel Office. During the review, the reviewer and the instructor evaluate the past year's performance, examining areas of strength and those requiring improvement. Recommendations are offered which ultimately result in more highly skilled field staff and safer courses.

Each team of instructors writes a detailed evaluation of the entire program at the end of each course. This is an additional opportunity to state safety concerns that are then discussed during the debriefing.

E. Course Paperwork

Each course is required to keep a detailed log including: 1) daily weather conditions, activities, student leaders, and student incidents with action taken, 2) class checklist, 3) camp location data, 4) accident/sickness/near-miss reports, 5) evacuation reports, 6) small group expedition worksheets. All of these records are reviewed during the debriefing.

F. Admissions Office

The Admissions process is the student's first experience with the NOLS Safety Program. The staff begins by screening applicants, making sure each applicant is enrolled in the appropriate course. As the applicant's registration forms arrive, they are reviewed by the staff. Of special interest is the medical form, the goal being to insure that each applicant is physically and mentally capable of participating in the course (most applicants are capable of completing a NOLS course; however, there may be a more appropriate course for some applicants, e.g., kayaking for those with knee or foot problems). If additional evaluation is required, the medical form is reviewed by the Safety Officer. If necessary, outside medical advice is sought or a student's doctor is consulted.

By determining that applicants are healthy and have selected the appropriate course, the Admissions Office takes the first step in insuring safety at NOLS.

G. Student Responsibility for Safety

The student plays a key role in the Safety Program in the following manner:

1) By reading the *NOLS Catalog of Courses*, the student determines the general requirements of a NOLS course.
2) Once the student is registered, a more detailed description is sent, outlining his or her particular course.
3) The student reads and signs a "Release and Assumption of Risk" form that alerts them that there are safety and risk issues involved in a NOLS course.

In addition, the student receives an orientation before the course departs. During this orientation, various facets of the course are emphasized — travel conditions, living conditions, course environment, student and instructor responsibilities, drug/alcohol/tobacco policy and course goals. Finally, there is particular emphasis on safety of the individual as well as safety of the group. This orientation, along with

the catalog, the course description, the Admissions process and the Assumption of Risk forms are all designed to impart an awareness that safety is the first priority on a NOLS course.

Once in the field, the student becomes an integral part of the Safety Program at NOLS. Our students are expected, under the supervision of their instructors, to learn and practice leadership, judgment, decision making and the safety guidelines taught on all courses.

H. The NOLS Core Curriculum

The NOLS Core Curriculum, which is taught on every course, teaches safety at every level. A student who is proficient in every aspect of the core curriculum can lead others safely in the wilderness environment. The curriculum includes:

1. SAFETY: Basic First Aid; safety and accident prevention; hazard evaluation; heat/cold-related injury prevention and treatment; rescue techniques and emergency procedure.
2. MINIMUM-IMPACT CAMPING AND RESOURCE PROTECTION: Campsite selection; shelter use; stove use and care; fire-building; sanitation and waste disposal; wildland ethics; land management and use.
3. TRAVEL TECHNIQUES: Backpacking or kayaking; energy conservation; trail technique/ paddling technique; map-reading and compass use; time control plans; route-finding and navigation; river crossings.
4. OUTDOOR LIVING SKILLS: Cooking and baking; nutrition and rations; fishing techniques and ethics; climate control; physiology; equipment care and selection.
5. ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS: Ecosystems; flora & fauna identification; geology; weather.
6. EXPEDITION DYNAMICS: Leadership; expedition behavior.

I. Support Services

NOLS maintains outstanding support services further guaranteeing an excellent Safety Program.

1. Equipment

NOLS maintains a complete inventory of course equipment, insuring each student goes into the field well equipped. NOLS equipment is designed to hold up under rugged conditions, setting a standard for functional expedition equipment. Some equipment companies actually test their gear on NOLS courses and use the resulting evaluations to improve their design. Students may bring their own equipment; however, it must meet NOLS standards.

2. Rations

In order to function at an optimal level in a wilderness setting, students and field staff must eat well. NOLS prides itself on providing an ample variety of nutritious, high energy foods which allow students to stay warm, comfortable and safe in any conditions encountered on the course.

3. Transportation

NOLS maintains its own transportation fleet designed to transport students safely to and from their roadhead destinations and, at the same time, respond to emergency situations that might arise. Most vehicles are serviced in-house to standards that exceed manufacturers' recommendations.

NOLS drivers are trained in-house and must pass a program which includes vehicle service/maintenance procedures, and driver training and procedures.

J. Evacuation Coordinator System

Should an injury or illness necessitate a student leaving a course, NOLS has developed an efficient and well organized system to render the student medical attention as soon as practical — normally in less than 24 hours.

The Evacuation Coordinator System works in the following manner:

1) Field Staff are briefed on the location of all roadheads and phones in their area. They prepare a written Evacuation Field Report to detail their evacuation plan.
2) There is an Evacuation Coordinator (EC) on duty 24 hours a day ready to receive evacuation calls at NOLS Headquarters. The EC arranges support for the evacuation: transportation, medical care if needed, intown housing, meals, etc.
3) The EC and the Admissions Office respond to the students' needs intown — phone calls to parents, continuing medical attention, etc.

The Evacuation Coordinator System is one of the showcase examples of the Safety Program. All participants in a NOLS evacuation are highly trained and skilled. NOLS is able to handle most evacuations and rarely needs to rely on outside help.

K. Computerized Safety Review Program

The Safety Office has a computer program for analyzing injury and illness reports. Aided by the computer, the Safety Officer is able to analyze trends for injuries or illnesses. With this information, recommendations are made to the Branch Directors and field staff for upgrading the safety program.

L. Safety Audits

NOLS periodically performs safety audits to determine the status of both intown and field safety systems at each Branch. Participants in the audit may include Board of Trustees Safety Committee members, other Board of Trustees members, the Executive Director, the Safety Officer, and senior NOLS instructors.

This review panel examines every facet of the Safety Program. A written report is prepared and submitted to the audited branch with recommendations for improving safety. Copies of the audit are distributed to other branches for their review. The audited branch responds in writing within 60 days of receiving the report with a plan for implementing the improvements suggested in the report.

Occasionally the audit is assisted by outside auditors which gives the School an additional perspective on safety at NOLS.

These audits give NOLS a periodic opportunity to insure that safety systems are actually functioning in the optimal manner, to review systems for improvement, and to implement changes to make an even safer program.

M. Safety Review Process

The Safety Review Process immediately reviews any major safety incident. A panel of administrators and field staff examines all the data associated with the incident and makes recommendations.

Conclusion

There is a safety consciousness that pervades the School and indeed guides every step of the School's development. Safety has always been and will continue to be the number one priority at the National Outdoor Leadership School. Nevertheless, no matter how many safety systems an organization employs, and no matter how stringently those systems are enforced, accidents will happen. The wilderness areas NOLS uses for classrooms have no handrails, no telephones and no simple solutions for complex emergency situations. Participants on our courses must accept the fact that risk always exists during travel and recreation in remote areas.

The Safety Program at NOLS involves employees at every level of the School. Despite a growing yearly enrollment, the safety record at NOLS continues to improve.

THE NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL